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bio on my mind: georgia's biotech industry

## TAKING BIOTECHNOLOGY TO THE MARKET



TAKING BIOTECHNOLOGY TO THE MARKET By Philip L. Graitcer

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In Druid Hills, on the grounds of a run-down mansion once owned by Coca Cola magnate Asa Candler, sit a couple of temporary trailers. They're the offices and laboratories of a biotech startup company called GeoVax, a company whose name may one day become just as synonymous with Atlanta as Coca Cola.

"The upside is incredible. If we get a product it will be in the 4 billion dollars a year or more," says Harriet Robinson. She's the Vice President of Research and Development at GeoVax. Her company is developing what could be the world's first AIDS vaccine. "We are developing a vaccine that would be used to prevent HIV/AIDS. You give it to uninfected people, and the goal is if they are exposed to the virus, they don't develop the disease."

Robinson hasn't always been a vaccine company executive. A few years ago, she was a microbiologist at Emory's Yerkes Primate Center. She'd invented a new vaccine that produced HIV immunity in monkeys and wanted to patent her discovery and try the vaccine in humans. She turned to Emory's Technology Transfer office for help because she says, "The job of the scientist is not to run the business. The wisdom of the scientist is to have a good business person running the business."

Emory's technology transfer office helps scientists establish their businesses. Scientists, patent attorneys, and MBAs in the tech transfer office evaluate the commercial potential of a discovery.

Usually chances of success are slim. Todd Sherer directs Emory's tech transfer office. Last year his staff evaluated 165 discoveries. "We expect that of that 165 will be licenseable and less than one percent will ever end up in a product on the market and generate any sort of substantial revenues or benefit."

But sometimes, they hit the jackpot. In 2005, rights to use two drugs created by Emory scientists were sold for 540 million dollars.

When Sherer's staff completed its review of Robinson's vaccine, they were convinced it had potential. "She came up with some important scientific discoveries and based on that, that research was then patented and the start-up company was created."

Financing is an important part of starting a company, and Emory used its own money to set-up GeoVax. Emory suggested an experienced CEO to run the business, and Robinson left Emory to run the science side. To supplement Emory's investment, Robinson helped the CEO raise money from 30 to 40 private investors to get the testing started. Eventually, Geovax sold stock and became a publicly traded company.

But even after the money is raised, there's still a long way to go. The vaccine is now in what's called the Phase 2 trial. Robinson has traded her white lab coat for a tiny office in the back of one of the trailers.

Today, her work day is a lot different from her days at Yerkes. "I'm mainly at my desk. It's mainly organization and writing. We do a tremendous amount for our protocols, for our clinical trials, and we also write up our research results and write up the results of the clinical trials."

Next come the Phase 3 trials — they're the clinical trials that find out if the vaccine actually works. They're scheduled to begin next year. According to Robinson, Geovax faces stiff competition from other vaccine companies. "One is Aventis which is a big company. Another is the NIH, National Institutes of Health vaccine research center. And then there's us.

Compared to them, Geovax is tiny. Says Robinson, "We're like David of David and Goliath."

But without Emory's technology transfer office, Robinson may never had the chance to raise her slingshot.

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